

Without forewarning, I'm assaulted by a sharp scent. It's putrid, and too strong, but mercifully brief. Sometimes it's gasoline. Sometimes it's waste. Sometimes it's something I can't put my finger on.

But it triggers a sleepy memory from the deep recesses of my mind. I had almost forgotten I had the memory still.

Despite the initial feeling of unpleasantness, I am happy. My mind replays a scene of me waking up early one morning, much to my annoyance, to the sound of a child screeching at the top of her lungs:

"MaMaaaaaaa! MaMMMAaaaaa!" I rise from the bed seeing as she wasn't stopping any time soon and I couldn't fall back asleep. The bed I share is with my cousin and sister, three of us lying like sardines in order to fit on it.

I walk across the walkway to the kitchen. My aunt already has some tea brewed and some bread rolls bought from the night before.

After I wash, I eat the bread by soaking it in the tea first, and then biting into it. I walk over to the outhouse from where the screeching little girl's voice was coming from.

The one outhouse that us four families share smells putrid if you get too close. But she just needed help doing her business. And wanted her mother's assistance.

Seeing her after she was helped, she smiled at me, and I couldn't help my annoyance giving way to amusement.

Innocence

It's either eight or nine of us sleeping in the one air conditioned room, some on the one bed, others on mats on the floor. Myself, my sister, two cousins, two of my cousin's kids, my uncle, his wife, and my cousin's husband. Always like sardines.

Before we all sleep, my cousin's husband tells me humorously (translated to English), "If you are dying [of heat] let me know" Since he had plans to turn off the air conditioning later so the bill wouldn't run high. We all rest in the cool air that feels like God's mercy itself, if it were a tangible thing.

The power is out in most of the city. In the city the Italians had once described as "Hades". Heat has a new name here.

I wake up from the heat that must have been rising for hours since the air conditioning ceased along with the electricity.

"Sele" I say, "I'm dying."

My uncle's wife lets out a short laugh in the darkness. She heard me, and so must have everyone else, if we have all been awakened from the heat. That felt like God's wrath, if it were a tangible thing.

Adapting

We are all excited. Because my father will be joining my sister and I here, and also to see the reactions on my relatives faces when they see my father.

We await for him outside of the airport. Is that him? Yes it is.

“Daddy!” We rush to him.

I run back to where my aunts and uncles are to tell them my father is here. They come over to greet their brother. Who, they’ve each haven’t seen for an odd amount of years.

My eldest uncle recognizes his younger brother.

He calls out to him softly.

Joy

The EuroCup is on. I care less. My male cousins lounge around the television, entertained. A next door neighbor is here to watch with us. He sits in the chair directly facing the television.

My eldest cousin walks in.

The neighbor jumps up. Too quickly for my liking, I wonder what is wrong.

“Sit here.” the neighbor tells my cousin, pointing to where he himself was sitting.

“It’s alright, remain seated.” my eldest cousin insists.

Oh.

Respect

It’s still dark outside, what time is it, 4 am? My sister and I walk outside, the other families in our compound are about ready to go. We follow them down to the bus station.

It was his turn. It was one of the neighborhood boys’ turn to go to military school, which generally lasts a year and is required of every student upon completion of twelfth grade.

When we get to the bus station, we all tell him to have strength, and say our goodbyes. He is about to board the bus, but his older brother calls him back. He slips him a note. Most likely words of encouragement. He leaves to get on the bus.

Most of us families are taking too long saying goodbye. A policeman yells “Get back!”, so the students can part from their loved ones, and swings his baton in our general direction.

We ran up onto the sidewalk. My heart is beating fast. I wasn't expecting that. A whistle blows, and the older brother as well as the crowd we are all in runs into the lot. We rush to the bus we think our boy is on. We yell goodbyes to him, and the bus pulls off the lot for a faraway place.

His mother is saddened. It's not her first rodeo, but isn't her last. We attempt to console her, and my sister and I leave for our grandmother's house.

Struggles

"What will you remember [of your time here]?" my aunt asks me.

"That there is too much tea and too little bread" I reply. She laughs. It's time to check in. My sister, father, and I haul our bags through security and check them in. We are told we can go back outside to say goodbye to our family members one last time.

We rush back out. The tears are many and run fast down my cheeks. My cousins tell me to have strength, to not weep, to arrive in peace, and other parting words. I can't help it. When will I see them again? Who knows how long it will be.

I return to the States. And try to cope with the cultural whiplash.

I never do.

Sorrow

“We are more alike than we are unlike” -Maya Angelou